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WATER AND VIOLENCE: SOMALIA



Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace called for protection of water resources and infrastructure from violent conflicts and terrorist acts. In this volume, we examine the issue of protecting water in Somalia.

Political Situation

After years of civil war and its status as a failed state, Somalia elected a President in early 2017, despite protracted politicking and disputes over the election results. President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed and Prime Minister Hassan Khaire lead the present civilian government. The government remains relatively weak. Somalia's political situation is also complicated by two separatist movements, i.e. the quest for separate Somaliland and Puntland.

Regional and International Actors

The situation on the ground in Somalia is complicated by the involvement and actions of numerous external parties, both from within the African continent and those from other national and international players.

The United Nations operates the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia which has a mandate that includes, "the provision of policy advice to the Federal Government and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) on peace building and state-building in the areas of: governance, security sector reform and rule of law (including the disengagement of combatants), development of a federal system (including state formation), constitutional review, democratisation and coordination of international donor support."

A long-standing African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) also continues its presence in Somalia, comprising as of March 2019, an estimated 22,000 troops from Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya,

Djibouti, and Sierra Leone. Several countries have undertaken to train Somali troops and law-enforcement personnel or have otherwise tried to provide material support in aid of building up essential security apparatus in Somalia. These include Turkey, Egypt, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. American troops have also lent support in the form of targeted airstrikes conducted via drones, in support of Somalia's Federal Government. In 2018, US carried out



47 airstrikes against Al-Shabaab in Somalia. In April 2019, President Trump signed an executive order extending the U.S Mission in Somalia for another year.

Somalia shares its longest land border with Ethiopia and their relationship, while currently cordial, has been marked with several military conflicts. At present Ethiopia has more than 4200 troops stationed in Somalia as a part of AMISOM. Ethiopia also has several thousand troops stationed in the parts of Somalia outside of the AMISOM, but with bilateral arrangement with Somalia.

Armed Non-State Actors

Most prominent of armed non-state actors in Somalia is Al-Qaeda's front in East Africa, Al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab's overall stated goal is the removal of troops from Somalia. The group is led by Ahmad Umar, who has recently been plagued by rumours of ill-health, prompting speculation on plans for succession, as well as what might happen in the event of his sudden death.

Al-Shabaab has an estimated 7000-9000 fighters, primarily based in central and southern Somalia, especially in the rural areas. The group is extremely well organized and capable of striking prominent targets, causing hundreds of fatalities in a single attack. Its modus operandi is similar to that of the main branch of Al Qaeda; Al-Shabaab has conducted a steady stream of high-profile and large-scale attacks on civilian targets, such as shopping malls, hotels, as well as water infrastructure.

The group also exerts control over large swathes of southern and central Somalia in the following regions: Gedo, Bay and Bakool, Lower and Middle Shabelle, Lower and Middle Juba, Hiraan, Puntland, Galguduud, and Mudug. It is notable that these areas are largely



ungoverned and the writ of government does not extend to them, thereby making Al-Shabaab the only authority in many of the regions. Al-Shabaab has been known to hold sharia courts, provide aid through charitable organizations, tax residents, and control access to essential services.

Water Resources and Infrastructure

There are two trans-boundary rivers in Somalia; Jubba which flows through southern Somalia and Shabeli/Shibeli which flows from the central and southern part of the country. The rivers originate in Ethiopia. During the dry season, aquifers act as an important reserve of water for the population. However, the quality of the groundwater is said to be quite poor due to over extraction. Therefore, the water resources of the Juba-Shabelle basin are particularly important for the region as a source of water for daily use, for irrigation as well as for general development of the country.

Somalia in 1987 proposed a dam on the Juba river called the Bardheere Dam for ensuring energy production and food security. The multipurpose dam was to have a 5700 Mm³ reservoir which would have irrigated 120000 ha of land and produce 140 MW of hydroelectric power. It was also to mitigate floods. However, the project never materialized because Ethiopia objected to it.

There is no cooperation between Ethiopia and Somalia on the two rivers and their Water Cooperation Quotient (WCQ) score is 0. Somalia also lacks technical and financial resources to set up required institutions and water infrastructure.

Water and Violence

Attacks on water resources and infrastructure, using water as a weapon of war or terror is routine in Somalia. This is apart from the constant clashes between clans on water, which leads to casualties and deaths.

It is to be noted that areas around the two transboundary rivers Jubba, Shabeli/Shibeli have been strongholds of Al-Shabaab (Lower and Middle Shabelle and Lower and Middle Juba). The rivers have been used as a weapon of war by the terror group.

According to the UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), about 6 million people in Somalia required humanitarian assistance in 2018 due to violence and prolonged droughts. The strategic use of water as a weapon only exacerbates the current situation. Given below are the examples of water being targeted or used as a weapon of violence.

By Governments/Troops

- Between 1980-1982, as a part of the then President Barre's "scorched earth policy", the government troops wantonly destroyed water points and catchments.
- In 2017, troops from Ethiopia reportedly attacked a water source used by Al-Shabaab, leading to further fighting.



By Al-Shabaab

- In 2012, Al-Shabaab poisoned a well and damaged water infrastructure used primarily by the Kenyan peacekeeping troops participating in the African Union mission in Somalia.
- In 2013 and 2016, Al-Shabaab destroyed wells in villages in Somalia.
- In 2014, in an attempt to weaponise water, Al-Shabaab destroyed levees along the Shebelle River in Somalia in order to make roads unusable by military forces. They also buried bore-wells, destroyed infrastructure, and restricted access to the Juba River. Al-Shabaab controlled Bardheere which is the only place to access Juba river and they didn't allow people from government-controlled areas to come to fetch water.
- In 2017, water wells were poisoned by Al-Shabaab killing 32 people, mostly women and children.
- In February 2019, Al-Shabaab captured from ISIS, El-Miraale, a water point situated in Puntland. It is possible that similar tactic of restriction of access may be imposed in this region as well.

Engagement processes

- **Engaging with Al-Shabaab:** seems extremely tough at the moment but is something that needs to be re-visited at a point when both the government of Somalia and the terror group are ready. Al-Shabaab's stated mission is to drive out foreign forces. As for humanitarian aid agencies, the group mostly expelled them from the region of its control, barring select few such as ICRC and MSF. Even the two major aid agencies have faced extreme difficulties as their aid workers have been targeted, kidnapped and killed. Al-Shabaab does engage in its own humanitarian aid but it's often done through the exploitation of activities of humanitarian aid groups. There are media reports that suggest that the involvement of Al-Shabaab in humanitarian aid is to gain international recognition. This could be a tool to engage with the terror group, however this is not an accepted position in the international community as any form of engagement with the group is regarded as aiding and abetting a terror group. Also since the group continues to threaten aid groups, it's difficult to say when an engagement process can be made. Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed Farmajo had indicated in March 2017 that he is open to having talks with Al-Shabaab. Such an engagement is yet to happen.



- **Role of Ethiopia:**

In June 2018, the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed agreed to strengthen their bilateral relations which included counter terrorism measures as well as cooperating with the African Union. By the end of January 2019, Ethiopia took leadership of AMISOM which it had refused in previous years under the earlier governments of Somalia. This seems to be a positive development and could also be expanded to include the much needed protection of water resources from Al-Shabaab and perhaps further looking at means to ensure trans-boundary cooperation between the two nations.

- **Role of AMISOM:**

By October 2018, AMISOM built 16 shallow wells in 8 villages whose existing wells were previously poisoned by the Al-Shabaab. The villages are in the Middle-Shebelle region and these wells would benefit about twenty seven thousand people. This was done with the financial assistance provided by the government of Kazakhstan. As mentioned previously, while engagement with Al-Shabaab would be difficult for the time being, such efforts of AMISOM should be further encouraged.

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